

INQUIRY RESPECTING THE TREATMENT, EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF INNU IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

English Transcript Volume 44

Commissioners: Retired Judge James Igloliorte, Dr. Mike Devine and Anastasia Qupee

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COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, good morning, everyone. About ready to start now.

Yes, so ready to start, we have a speaker coming up.

The first thing is we'll say a prayer, so Penote is going to lead us in a prayer. Thank you.

ELDER ANTUAN: Good morning, everybody.

And the prayer this morning I'd like to dedicate to all the students who didn't come home the years they went to residential school.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you, Penote.

Just again reminding you about healing services that are available here.

So we have Sean Allen who's just right there, coming in with Elizabeth. And as well we have from healing services Rebecca Rich and Mary Sillett.

So they're available here throughout the day if anybody needs any support or to talk to someone.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, so we have our first speaker this morning is Sheila Cooper.

If she could come up here, please.

S. COOPER: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Good, how are you?

S. COOPER: Good morning.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Good morning.

So we have the interpretation services. So the way that this will work is that you'll just kind of talk briefly and then Anne will translate.

S. COOPER: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay.

S. COOPER: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: And it's a bit of a challenge sometimes. I'm still challenged by it, I forget, but Anne is wonderful at it. If I talk for five minutes, she can repeat it all, apparently, in Innu-aimun, I don't know what's she saying, but it sounds really good.

So basically this morning just you have a story to tell, so just start and we'll be listening.

Thank you.

S. COOPER: Okay, hi everybody, good morning.

My name is Sheila Cooper, and I am a foster parent. And I say that I am a foster parent, but just recently I found out that I'm not.

I've been a foster parent for 21 years and was just recently told that I was never a foster parent, that the children that I took were either kinship or I knew the family, which in both cases was not correct.

I'm gonna start off with my adopted child here, his name is Jason Katshinak. And I had Jason since he was one, almost two. And I took Jason, I think it was on a three-month term, and ended up keeping him forever. And I just recently adopted him.

Over the years with children's services we tried to get Jason to have family visits and

stuff in Natuashish and was told that children's services is not gonna support that for Jason, even though he had siblings – nine siblings at the time, he was number 10 – and children's services said they would not support visits for him to go to his family. And we kept trying over the years, and finally at 16, he finally got to do his first visit to Natuashish.

And we just kind of feel – did you want me to stop here? Okay.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

S. COOPER: I believe that the only reason we got to go to Natuashish when Jason was 16 was because there was a social worker came to my house and tucked her legs under herself on my couch and I brought it up again that Jason needed to go and visit his family. The only visits or communication he had with his family went either through Facebook, through me, or else it was when they came to town, and I would go and pick them up and invite them to our house. And that was not through children's services at all.

And when Jason was 16, we were fighting on the – 'cause he had a little brother that he gamed with, gaming on the Internet – and we had talks with that social worker that came in and I said: He has a right to see his family. And she said: Well, Jason, you don't know your family. And every time we tried to speak, she would interrupt and say: Well you don't know them, well you don't know them. And it pissed me off to the point that when she left there was no – I didn't want her back in my home. I thought she was rude to my child and pissed us off.

Then when Jason did get to go home when he was 16, he – you know, the connection that he should have had, from the time that he was little, it was kind of too late in a lot of areas. He never – that connection was never formed with his biological mother, that very well could have been formed had he been allowed to visit her in the years past.

And the same with his siblings – want me to stop?

I also had five of Jason's siblings – five girls. I was actually the only foster parent in Canada with – single foster parent – with eight children at a time. And so I had five of Jason's siblings too, and because I was overwhelmed, I asked children's services if they could assist me, and children's services instead decided that it would be better, instead of having somebody come in to assist me with eight children – one had Down syndrome – not Jason's sister, just another child that I fostered – and children's services decided that it would be better for the kids to go stay in a hotel and have a one-on-one worker, which was disappointing to me, having to give up five of his siblings.

And – stop now?

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

S. COOPER: Also about Jason's language. Jason's not fluent in Innu. Jason only knows sporadic words that I know myself and over the years, too, with children's services that was another fight that I lost over trying to get it so that they could fund for Jason to learn to speak his language. Just wanna add that.

And on the way down here this morning me and Jason was having a conversation and he said that children's services made him do drugs. Jason had some anger issues when he was little and because of his anger issues they decided that Jason needed Concerta, and we fought, trying to get him off of the Concerta because Concerta is not to manage anger.

And we were told that he had to take the medication, and so Jason was on 36 mg of Concerta until, I think we snuck you off

when he was, what? – 12,13 and I just stopped giving it to him and the Concerta was just making it so that he wasn't hungry, that he was docile; and we just took him off, and nobody ever questioned it.

When Jason was aging out of care and – I lost my train of thought. When Jason was aging out of care – well, just right before he was aging out of care – Jason was 18, I think, and I had to go to St. John's for work, so I had to be gone for two days. So I left Jason with his two younger foster brothers; I left Jason, and I let children's services know that Jason was – when I got back, and I let her know that Jason watched the two boys while I went up to St. John's.

She came back with: Jason's not capable of watching his two siblings and that I would be investigated – and which I was. And for the two younger – for his two younger foster brothers, and I was considered medium risk after that because Jason watched them and Jason wasn't mentally capable of watching his two siblings from their point of view.

Keep going?

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

S. COOPER: They said that because of Jason's anger issues at the time that he wasn't mentally capable. I expressed to the social worker that it's been years since his anger issues were a problem, and the social worker said –not at this meeting that I'm talking about but at another meeting – the social worker said that Jason can go on to some kind of program, assistance program for mentally delayed people and that I would get $500 a month respite. I stated to them that Jason is my respite with his siblings and that he's not mentally delayed and – because Jason's diagnosed FAS but Jason's not – he's not high on the spectrum.

And just like to add, Jason, most recently, bought his own house. He works full-time at Voisey's Bay and he's 50/50 – actually he's 51 and I'm 49 per cent owners in John's Place, 10 cabins.

So in that business, so Jason's thriving, and how children's services can try and label him into a box of mentally delayed is just another statistic that they're trying to – I can't tell you the reasoning 'cause that's just my opinion. But, yeah, that's what happened.

And if I can go back to when they sent us to the first visit to Natuashish, when Jason was 16 years old, they put us in a hotel room with one double bed, and me and Jason had to sleep together. And that was children's services did that. And there was no – we just had to sleep together in the same bed. At 16 years old, a foster child. They said there was no other rooms, once it was too late.

Okay, so I had another child – am I taking up too much time? No? Okay. Too much time, am I taking up too much time – okay, I had another foster child. He had Down syndrome, and when I first got him, they told me that it was either I take him in, or they're gonna have to institutionalize him. So I took him in, and three months turned into five years. And with that child, my only major issue that I had with children's services was – oh! Wait, before I go to that child, I want to finish up with Jason, with – they never had a file on him when he was – in 2015. There was no file at children's services for Jason. They couldn't locate a file, there was no file.

From age – from when I first got him until Jason was eight years old, we never had a family visit. Nobody from children's services came in monthly like they were supposed to, to check on Jason. So that was from two 'til eight, nobody came to see him.

There was no file on him in 2015 so a social worker in Goose Bay, Kerry Davis, and I sat down and went through Jason's life so that she could build a file on him because they had nothing and all the papers and doctors' papers and everything that I had filed, and

school report cards and stuff that I had, was what made up the file. 'Cause she said we have to start from scratch here and make a file on him, 'cause there is nothing.

Back to the Down syndrome child that I fostered, when I had him – so I had him for five years and then they decided that they were giving the family a chance again, which was awesome, and the only issue there was that him having Down syndrome and never had opportunity to say good bye to me. I mean, I can deal with it because I know that children at some point go home. I'm good; I was good always with a child that was to go home; but no, they never gave any notice. They just removed him and said that he was going back to his family.

Later, I'm not sure if it was a month later or something, they called me and asked me if I was interested in taking him back and I said absolutely not. When you remove him like that, for his own mind, for his own mental health, you know, he had to have had separation anxiety, with the Down syndrome diagnosis and only being with me for five years. So that was my issue with him.

And I had a girl who they – I guess, because I was never a foster parent – I had a girl, and they gave me $142 dollars a month for her. She was 15, and I kept her for just over a year, but financially I couldn't do it anymore, at $142 a month, and so I called children's services, and they said: No, we've got you listed as kinship, so that's all you get. And I said: Yeah, but I'm not her family, I'm not this girl's family. And they said well, there's nothing they could do, that's what's written there.

So I took it upon myself to contact the Minister of Health to see if he could raise the funds, and go in there, because as far as I knew, over the years, I was a foster parent. And the Minister of Health made it so that we got $192 a month, which was still not enough to take care of her. I mean, to keep her up to par with all the other teenage girls, there was – after a year, I just couldn't do it financially. So that was another issue that I had.

There was another child that I took. So they brought him to me and there was supposed to be no contact with the family, but I had made contact with his grandfather, just to let him know that I had him in my care, and then the mother contacted me, and she was – her words to me was, children's services said that she'll probably never get him back. And shortly after … sorry. Shortly after, she committed suicide.

So that's it. That's my story. Thank you, we're good? Sorry.

Do anybody have questions or anything for me? Is that how that works? I don't know how this works.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Not any questions from me. But thank you for asking if we have questions.

S. COOPER: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: But first of all I just wanted to say thank you so much for coming in this morning to tell your story and your experiences as a foster parent for over two decades. And thank you for the care that you –

S. COOPER: Not a foster parent. I'm not a foster parent.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – not a foster parent.

S. COOPER: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, caregiver.

S. COOPER: Yeah, I think, I guess.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you – for this past two decades.

And also there's a number of things you've pointed out. But just a couple that stand out to me or the whole thing about children transitioning back to their biological parents, for example, and your experience of that. As well as the supports that parents sometimes need in providing care.

And the other thing of course was what the different rates that seem to be paid for kinship kinds of arrangements and certainly those are areas that need to be looked at for sure, so.

So thank you very much for that. It becomes part of the record, so we'll be looking at all –

S. COOPER: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: It'll become part of the record, so we'll be looking at all of those kinds of issues that are identified.

S. COOPER: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you very much.

S. COOPER: Okay, thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Thank you, Sheila. I just wanted to say thank you for coming.

And I know it's a bit – people get nervous they do come, but I'm glad that you came to share your story. I think it's important to hear as well from the foster parents and what their experiences are in caring for Innu children.

So I wanna thank you for coming.

S. COOPER: Yes, you're welcome.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

Thanking Sheila for coming to the Inquiry.

S. COOPER: Can I just add too, that, you know, under different circumstances maybe I didn't have to adopt Jason –

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Mm-hmm.

S. COOPER: – and Jason didn't have to accept me as his mother, but because I believe of children's services and the visits that Jason should have had that he never had, he could have had this connection with his biological family, and I think that that opportunity was taken away from him and that made it so that we really are thrown together.

I mean, I love Jason. I love Jason like he's my own child and I'm sure he loves me like I'm his mother, but at the same time, I'm not his biological mother and it would have been way more beautiful in the scheme of foster parenting had he had the opportunity to love his biological mother and go home to her. But unfortunately, he never had that opportunity.

So at the end of the day, the only option was for me to adopt him. Yeah, so I just wanted to add that.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you.

So our next speaker is not scheduled until 11:00, but I'll ask Paula to see if she can make contact with him and see if he can come in earlier. So if that happens then we'll reconvene earlier and yeah – see what follows.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: I just want to let people know that there is a private session happening 'til 11:00 o'clock, and I do have a speaker coming at 11:00 o'clock, So in about a half hour. So right now we're in another session.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]